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magazine

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NEW YEAR RESOLUTION: SAVE BEES

At a time when India's native pollinators are declining, and the government is toying with ideas like genetically modified insects, ordinary citizens must step up. Hobby beekeeping is just one option

(Clockwise from left) Apoorva B.V. introduces schoolchildren to bees; Medha Monteiro; Peter Fernandes; and Keenan D'Costa who started beekeeping to help biodiversity in Goa.

Simrit Malhi

Those small, misshapen apples you hate seeing at the supermarket? Turns out, you can blame bees – or the lack of the tiny, buzzy creatures – for them. New research from the U.S. and Europe has found that the number and variety of bees affect the quality, size, and flavour of apples.

Of course, apple farmers have suspected as much for years. In Himachal Pradesh, Davinder Thakur, 34, an organic apple farmer from Kullu Valley, remembers his grandfather talking about a time when the region only had the local bee species (*Apis cerana* or Asian honey bee). Their hives were kept in the hollowed-out trunks of old trees and custom-built areas within the walls of houses; the bees were loved and treated like a part of the family. And the apple crop was bountiful every year.

Then, a large-scale viral colony collapse in the 1960s prompted the European bee (*Apis mellifera* or western honey bee) to be introduced to India. This meant the local bees had a tough time re-establishing themselves. Besides competition from the western import, deforestation, an increased use of pesticides, and climate change impacted the bee population. So much so that many farmers now have to rent bee boxes to pollinate their orchards and farms. (The *Apis mellifera* isn't always easy to maintain, as it succumbs easily to local predators and parasites, and also needs a lot of flora to feed from – something the region's seasonal availability cannot provide.)

Thakur was eight when his grandfather taught him the local ways of rearing bees. Today, he has more than 100 colonies of the Asian honey bee in boxes. And he is trying to improve his region's lack. "I have been training Himachali farmers for the past 10 years on how to rear the local bee because of its resilience and resistance to climate change [and parasites], which is a major problem in the mountains," he says.

His organisation, Mountain Honey Bee, offers 25-day workshops that are free of charge (the next is in April). "Having trained almost 200 farmers, it is obvious how badly the area is in need of pollinator species," he states, adding that farmers have noticed how, within just a few years of improving the local bee population, apple produce always doubles.

The unlikely bee champion

Bees are critical wildlife. Both honey bees and wild bees (think bumble bees, mason bees) are key pollinators. And when over three-quarters of all crop plants in India rely on insects and animals for pollination, it should worry us that bee conservation isn't making the headlines as much as tigers and rhinos.

It's still not too late. As we refine our new year resolutions, we can also take the time to think about biodiversity. Unlike the passive role many of us take in helping 300-kg tigers and 2,000-kg rhinos – signing online petitions, for one – you can save these tiny 0.1 gram 'buzzers' from wherever you are. You just need a box and some know-how. Or a few native flowering plants on your balcony.

Speaking to Bengaluru-based Apoorva B.V., 40, the proclaimed 'Bee Man of India', you get the feeling one might even be able to build relationships with them. "Bees are special creatures. They have a very developed sense of smell as well as memory, and can recognise human faces," he says. There is a famous story of the Kondha tribe from Odisha using tamed bees to fight against the British in 1842.

We must see native bees as pets, not pests. Even in dense cities, people living in houses with balconies can keep bee boxes [stingless bees are ideal, after some training]. The bees will collect nectar from trees within a two-to-three-kilometre radius and return to your house. You'll have a hobby, and they'll help in pollination

AMIT GODSE
Bee Man of Pune

Apoorva gave up engineering 18 years ago to turn beekeeper. He started with two beehives in his bedroom, which he kept beside his open window, and now keeps 600 colonies and runs a multi-crore honey business – besides training aspiring urban beekeepers and tribal communities on ethical beekeeping, and saving hundreds of colonies a day, all for free.

His workshops are always full, and the next one is scheduled for February 8, at his farm on Magudi Road in Bettahalli. "The workshops mostly have 30-somethings, and parents who want to introduce their children to nature. Many schools, especially alternative ones, are participating too, like The Valley School and Vidyakshetra," he says. "Post the COVID-19 pandemic, there's been a spike with people looking at it as a stressbuster. Beekeeping needs mindfulness; you have to be calm when interacting with bees. They also get a dopamine hit, watching combs being built, and when they harvest honey. I'm seeing people setting up bee boxes on their balconies, and asking apartment complex societies to do it in their common areas."

Bee trails and more

Another bee champion is Under The Mango Tree (UTMT). Founded in 2009, the organisation helps marginal farmers increase yield through sustainable practices such as beekeeping. At a time when States such as Karnataka have farmers hand-pollinating tomato and chilli plants, hiring local labour to do a job that a few bees can do in just one morning, such initiatives are key.

"Over the last decade, UTMT Society has collected field-level data on how putting bees on farms can increase yields of vegetables such as gourds and tomatoes, most cash crops like cashew and mango, besides oilseeds, by anywhere from 30% to 60%," says Sujana Krishnamoorthy, executive director of UTMT. "There is anecdotal evidence in [States such as] Madhya Pradesh on increased yields of *mahua* and *chironji* seeds from forests due to increased pollinator populations."

Krishnamoorthy has also discovered through her own research (still a work in progress, which will be published soon) that India's native bees show high floral constancy – consistently foraging from the same flower species – which was earlier seen as a trait only present in the western honey bee. "This finding means that our native bees are better adapted to the needs of our farmers than non-natives [which are being supplied by the government]," she states.

Education can be pivotal. Despite India being home to four native species of honey bees – *Apis cerana indica*, *Apis dorsata*, *Apis florea* and *Trigona* – public understanding of their importance is limited. Krishnamoorthy is a supporter of beekeeping being taught in schools, especially rural schools where there is space and an inclination to take the training home. "It is an opportunity for children to learn where their food comes from, and get involved in [discussions on] ecology and biodiversity," she says. "An example I know of an institution doing this is Bhopal's Barkatullah University, with its bee trail." Launched last year, on March 3, World Wildlife Day, it features stingless bee (*Tetragonula iridipennis*) colonies and educational displays. "Initiatives like this can help to create awareness about bees and get the public sensitive to them in their environment, instead of killing them with pesticides," she says.

What you can do

- **Support eco-friendly farming:** Whenever possible, choose food grown with fewer chemicals and less plastic packaging. Organic or agroecological systems tend to be better for pollinators, and the planet.
- **Plant with purpose:** Whether it is a balcony box, school garden, rooftop, or community field, every flowering space counts. Try to grow a mix of native plants that bloom throughout the year, such as hibiscus, *tulsi*, marigold, to support a variety of pollinators. Those who have lawns, keep some pollinator-friendly spaces without mowing everything.
- **Go pesticide-free:** Avoid using pesticides, herbicides, or fungicides where possible.
- **Reduce night lighting:** Install outdoor lights on timers or motion sensors. Nights are crucial for many pollinators, particularly moths, which are also vital to pollination.
- **Speak up in your community:** Encourage local leaders to support pollinator-friendly practices, such as planting along roadsides, creating urban gardens, and regulating plastic waste.

Kerala and Karnataka's stingless campaign

According to data from UTMT, Ahmedabad has the highest number of urban beekeepers, primarily because most homes there have gardens. There has also been a large spike in the number of beekeeping workshops in New Delhi with the advent of Sunder Nursery.

Many State governments, too, are doing their bit to promote apiculture. In Kerala, attempts are being made with stingless bees. These highly social insects thrive in the State's Western Ghat biodiversity, rubber plantations (a constant source of food) and humid climate. "They are one of the most diverse groups, quiet, with small nests, and often go unnoticed," says Vinita Gowda from the Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research (IISER), who researches indigenous bee species. "Planting pollen and nectar-rich flowers around you is a good start to support stingless and solitary bees, as is building bee hotels [structures that mimic natural cavities and hollows in wood]. Nesting sites of most bees are under threat, and the exercise of building a bee hotel meets multiple purposes – it spreads awareness in the community while supporting biodiversity."

In Karnataka, too, meliponiculture (stingless bee keeping) is picking up. In Dakshina Kannada, the Gramajanya Farmers' Producer Company (FPC) has launched a 'honey at every home' initiative to promote it in urban areas – selling bee boxes with colonies, and also helping maintain them if bee enthusiasts need help. Mangaluru is the main focus, among other urban areas.

Government needs to buck up

With climate change becoming more pronounced, "being a farmer today is one of the most difficult livelihoods in our country – and yet, the most necessary", says Peter Fernandes, a Goa-based beekeeper and pioneer of permaculture.

Bees can't be separated from this discussion. "We must make it clear to our leaders that we care about the environment and, more importantly, our food. Farmer groups and citizen movements, along with private research organisations like ATREE [Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment], need to come together to make their voices heard."

Government attempts, at the moment, are lacking. Yes, the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) distributes a large number of bee boxes across India, facilitates honey production, and helps rural households benefit economically.

But, as Krishnamoorthy shared with the *Magazine* some time ago, "Which farmer can spend ₹3 lakh to buy 50 boxes [a few years ago, a bee box cost ₹3,500 and the Mellifera cost another ₹3,000; prices have changed since]? Instead, give a small farmer ₹2,000 of support for boxes [UTMT's cost ₹1,000] and training to transfer local bees from the wild and rear them, and you give them a low-cost way of adding to their yields through pollination and to produce honey."

CONTINUED ON » PAGE 4

The aftermath of a tidal flood in the Sundarbans, which features in Amitav Ghosh's new novel; and (below) the author. (SUPRATIM BHATTACHARJEE, GETTY IMAGES)

IN CONVERSATION

'THE METAVERSE HAS ALWAYS EXISTED'

Award-winning author Amitav Ghosh on the existence of parallel worlds, climate denial, and imagination

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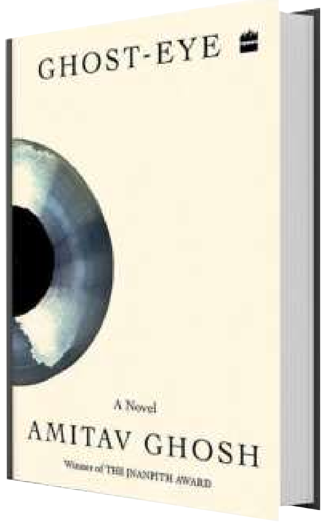
It has been a few years since fiction emerged from the prolific pen of Amitav Ghosh. He sets things right with *Ghost-Eye* (published by Fourth Estate), his latest novel about reincarnation and saving the Sundarbans. *Ghost-Eye* explores themes familiar to a Ghosh reader, but the journey goes beyond the here and now. The introduction of characters from other Ghosh novels gives the reader a frisson of excitement, and yet, the novel itself is a fresh exploration. In Chennai for the launch of his book, Ghosh speaks extensively about technique, reincarnation, the fossil fuel crisis, and his book for the 'time pod' by Norway's Future Library. Edited excerpts:



Question: *You have said earlier that* Ghost-Eye *'came to you'. How much craft or design went into shaping the idea after?*
Answer: The craft and design are absolutely essential to it. The material comes to you, yes, but then the shaping and the craft happen in a different way. It calls upon everything I know about writing fiction; all my experience of 40 years. So yes, even when the material 'comes to me', it requires a great deal of labour to get it in shape.

Q: Ghost-Eye *reintroduces characters and themes from earlier books* – Gun Island, The Hungry Tide, The Glass Palace, The Calcutta Chromosome...
A: They fell in place too, like dominoes... I wrote *Gun Island* with Dinu as the narrator (also the narrator in *Ghost-Eye*). I really liked that voice; I found it very useful and productive. So once I went back to him as the narrator, all the other characters fell into place.

Q: *As a man of science and academic rigour, how do you posit reincarnation in a scientific world?*
A: That's really the paradox. I've had a very rigorous education in some of the world's best universities and I'm completely acculturated into a very modern materialist worldview. At the same time, if you look at all the evidence, and the enormous amount of research that's been done on reincarnation, it is overwhelming. There are thousands of instances of children recalling, with great exactitude, their past lives.

If there's even one case, it completely changes everything that we know about the world. It forces you to realise that this world that we take to be completely singular, is not; there are other parallel worlds that exist in simultaneity. The metaverse has always existed.

Q: *Food and fish are very important in* Ghost-Eye*; they are nearly characters. What role do they play in your life?*
A: I've always been interested in food and cooking. I've realised that if you grow up in a city, the primary mode in which you engage with your environment is actually through food.

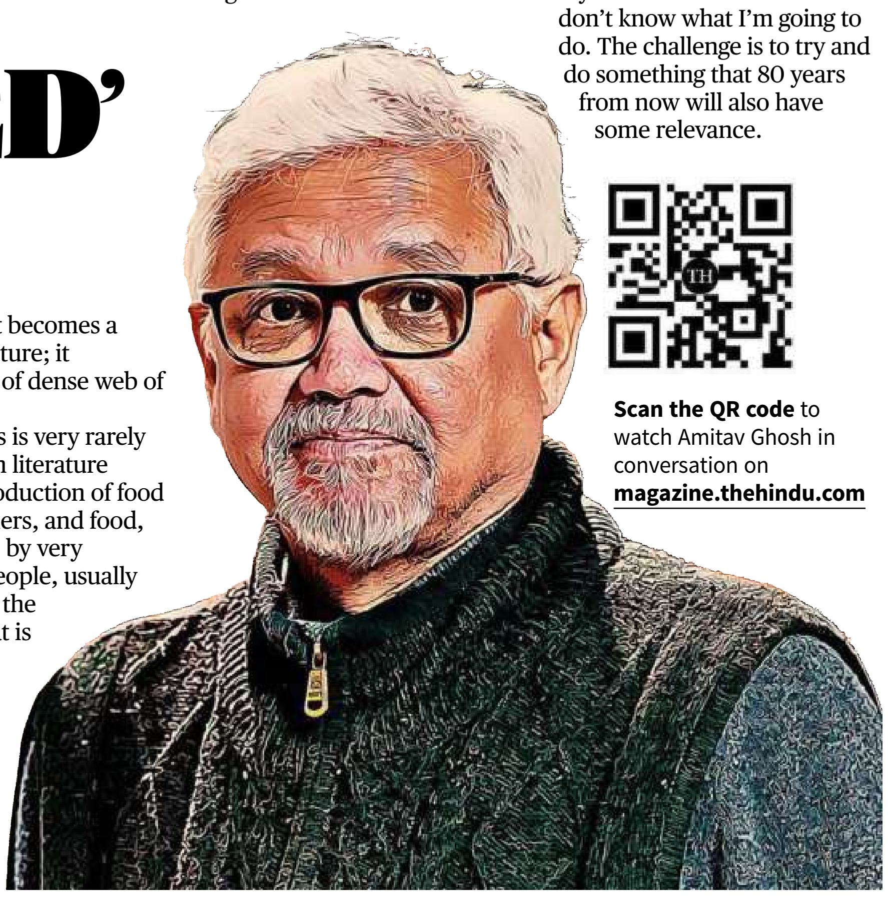
It was the beginning of my interest in the environment and in the world around me. Fish is so essential to Bengal, a land of rivers. We are also a land that has seen a lot of famine, and without fish, the great majority of people in Bengal would lose a primary source of nutrition. But it's not just nutrition; it becomes a part of your culture; it becomes a sort of dense web of symbolism.

However, this is very rarely written about in literature because the production of food is done by farmers, and food, mostly, is made by very marginalised people, usually women, within the household. That is also one of the reasons why I worked at bringing it into my work. Most of all, because food grounds you in reality.

Q: *U.S. President Donald Trump recently withdrew America from the climate fund and a bunch of other organisations that urge climate action. How will this impact the world?*
A: It's going to be disastrous, there's no doubt. Look at the ideological damage that it does, when you deny the reality of a phenomenon that everybody is experiencing around the world. It's within the English-speaking world, most of all, that you see this phenomenon of climate denial.

The Anglo-American empire has been built upon fossil fuel. Their engagement with fossil fuel is also, in some profound sense, emotional and imaginative. The whole Anglo-American world now has such deep stakes in fossil fuel that it's almost impossible for them to turn away from it. The great tragedy is that they're fighting to preserve an energy regime that is already on its way out.

Q: *You were commissioned to write a book for the Future Library's 'time pod', one that will not be opened or read for 100 years (from 2014). How is that going?*
A: The daunting thing about the project is that they don't give you any guidelines at all. When you are confronted with that kind of freedom, it's very difficult to know what you're going to write. Let me say that I've been working on it now for several months, only to find myself at a dead end. I still don't know what I'm going to do. The challenge is to try and do something that 80 years from now will also have some relevance.



Scan the QR code to watch Amitav Ghosh in conversation on **magazine.thehindu.com**

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Kanishka Gupta (SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR)

INTERVIEW

THE OUTSIDER'S GUIDE TO INDIAN PUBLISHING

Literary agent Kanishka Gupta, who will be at *The Hindu* Lit for Life, has a few prescriptions to revive the industry

Kanishka Gupta rarely minces his words when it comes to the state of Indian publishing – be it on the nepotism and privilege prevalent in the industry or the quality of translation of *bhasha* texts, which, in his view, is often mediocre. "I am honest about things, which is why I have a fair share of detractors," says the Delhi-based literary agent.

And yet, Gupta's agency, Writer's Side, founded in 2010, is possibly the largest in Asia today, having represented more than 1,500 writers across multiple genres worldwide. Agent to authors such as Anees Salim, Indira Jaising, Neha Dixit, Jerry Pinto, Ranjit Hoskote and Josy Joseph, Gupta has also always been a champion of translations and has two International Booker Prize-winning books – Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* (translated by Deepa Bhasthi) and Daisy Rockwell's translation of Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* – in his roster. He also discovered Booker-shortlisted author Avni Doshi and globally represented Shehan Karunatilaka, winner of the 2022 Booker Prize, for his 2024 short story collection *Birth Lottery and Other Surprises*, a new novel, and his series of children's books.

"It has been a difficult journey," says this self-confessed industry "outsider", who will be at *The Hindu* Lit for Life in Chennai today. Gupta refuses to be bitter about what he sees as the publishing industry's cliquishness. "If I had been in a position of power and pedigree and come up through the right ranks, I, too, would have been suspicious of someone like me. But I kept at it," he says with a smile.

The rise of Writer's Side has coincided with many changes in the industry. One of them, according to Gupta, is the role of an agent. "Agents are very important and powerful right now. When I started, 5% or 10% of the books were agented; now it is close to 60%-70%. In fact, some publishers will not entertain a manuscript without an agent," he says. At his session at Lit for Life, Gupta will discuss 'Publishing in the Age of Infinite Voices: Curation or Chaos?' with Elizabeth Kuruvilla of Simon & Schuster India and Manasi Subramaniam of Penguin Random House India.

The industry, while not in crisis mode, is clearly not growing, says Gupta, who has some prescriptions to reinvigorate the stagnating publishing business. He firmly believes that the system needs better marketing professionals who can develop more thoughtful, well-curated marketing plans. Also, "we need our own-grown influencers whose recommendations actually make a difference, like the famous book clubs in the U.S. and the U.K., which feature stars like Reese Witherspoon and Dua Lipa".

Does the spectre of AI that looms over nearly everything today bother him? "I have not been affected by AI," he says. "Nor have I received too many AI-generated submissions. The only real impact AI has had on me is that I've been invited to panels on AI and literature."

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War lords and ghost cows

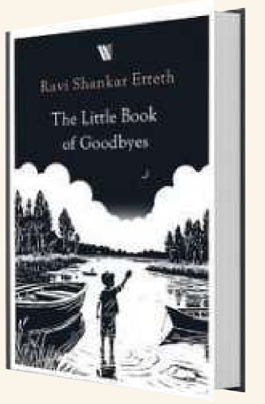
This short book of autofiction reflects on love, loss and cultural inheritance

Akankshya Abismruta

Ravi Shankar Etteth's *The Little Book of Goodbyes* covers his huge inheritance of relics, stories, local myths and legends from his family in the Malabar region of Kerala. Blending fiction and autobiography, the author as narrator eases readers into a series of goodbyes through tales of love and loss.

He begins with his grandfather's life in the 1920s when Uttupikkal Velukutty was charged with suppressing the Moplah rebellion in Malabar. Keeping past and present in conversation, the author moves from the Kerala of the past to his later experiences in Delhi, Landour, New York, and Germany.

Ancestral houses are often bubbling with stories. Etteth describes his family home, Irulanparatharavadu, as the "haunted mansion with an underground cave and ghost cows" – as described by his great grandmother. He doesn't mention if his family is matrilineal, but we witness the experiences of all the women who come to inhabit the mansion.



The Little Book of Goodbyes
Ravi Shankar Etteth
Westland
₹299

More importantly, this descendant of "war lords and men who broke into temples and changed history" helps readers understand the futility of guilt. He says, "All promises can't be kept because some are beyond your circumstances. But there is no need to feel guilty. All you can do is live your best, be proud of what you do, and make those who love you proud of you."

The loss mentioned in these pages isn't merely personal but also cultural. With the passage of time, the local myths and legends that spruce up the stories disappear, and only ghosts remain. One is bound to reflect on the loss of cultural inheritance when experiences of family elders go unrecorded. The author was given, or found relics and letters that helped him piece together this book, and in turn, it becomes the inheritance of readers who are witnesses to a family's history and experiences long after the final goodbye.

The reviewer is an independent writer based in Sambalpur, Odisha.

INTERVIEW | *THE HINDU* LIT FOR LIFE 2026

ROOTS OF SANSKRIT

Laura Spinney traces the origins of the language of early Indians and Hindu scriptures

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On a grey and gloomy afternoon in Paris, brightened by the holiday lights, science journalist and author Laura Spinney spoke to *The Hindu* over a Zoom call about her book, *Proto: How One Ancient Language Went Global* [HarperCollins India]. Spinney will be speaking at *The Hindu* Lit For Life on January 18. Excerpts from an interview:

Question: *Half of humanity speaks an Indo-European language. An obvious question to ask, therefore, is where was it born?*

Answer: For long, similarities have been noticed between what we now refer to as the Indo-European languages, but they hadn't been conceived of as a family. It was about the end of the 18th century that a British judge, Sir William Jones, posted in Calcutta (now Kolkata), mused that, perhaps, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and some other languages sprang from a common ancestor, which no longer existed. He turned out to be right. The idea that Latin spoken on the Italian peninsula and Sanskrit spoken in India naturally leads to the idea that there must have been a place where this one ancient language that gave birth to all the others was born, a homeland, a birthplace, a people who spoke them. Until quite recently, there were a number of rival theories to explain where the languages came from and how they were born. Only in the last 20 years, has the weight of evidence, partly thanks to new scientific tools and new kinds of evidence, come down quite solidly behind one of those theories.

If I take all the research that I condense into my book and summarise it, I would say that those languages were born in the Eurasian steppe, in what is now a war zone between Ukraine and Russia, and that they were born there somewhere between 5,000-6,000 years ago.

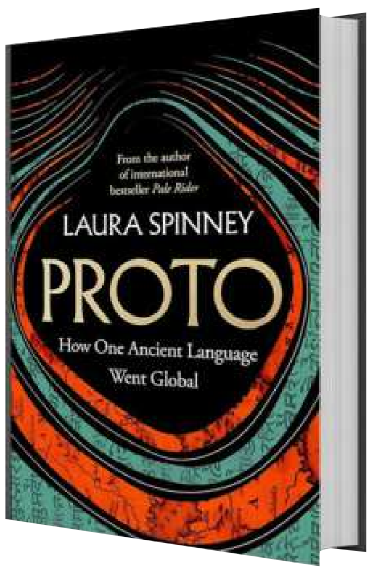
Q: *What has changed now for us to have a better understanding?*

A: The arrival a decade or two ago of a new discipline, namely paleogenetics, with its ability to extract and analyse ancient DNA, has transformed this story. What it has meant is that we can now trace migrations of prehistoric people. We can track people through space and time before historical records documented where they were going and what they were doing. So, now we have another window on that prehistoric world.

Since there's very often a correlation between prehistoric migration routes and the diasporas of languages, the way that language families branch as people migrate and their dialects get separated, mean that those two sources of knowledge together are extremely powerful. It helps us with the third part of the puzzle archaeology to fill out this picture.

Author Laura Spinney

> [Towards]...the end of the 18th century, British judge Sir William Jones, posted in Calcutta (now Kolkata), mused that, perhaps, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and some other languages sprang from a common ancestor, which no longer existed. He turned out to be right



Q: *There has been a long-standing debate on where Sanskrit was born. Is there more clarity on its origins?*

A: Certainty and absolute knowledge are in scarce quantity in this story. Is there a consensus? Yes. But there are several theories still on the table. The weight of the evidence is behind the theory that Sanskrit came with immigrants who we know for sure came into India via the northwest corner, perhaps via the Khyber Pass, like so many later immigrants, around 1600 BCE or a little earlier. There is a lot of circumstantial evidence that suggests that people brought Sanskrit with them. For example, there are very close similarities between Sanskrit and the Persian languages, including Avestan, which was the language spoken by Zarathustra. There are also ritual similarities with prehistoric cultures. There is this culture that archaeologists refer to as Sintashta, which was discovered in the 1960s, in the Russian steppe southeast of the Urals. It looks as if this culture essentially invented the chariot around 2000 BCE. Sanskrit and Avestan have the same word for a 'chariot' (*ratha*) that is derived from the Proto-Indo-European word for wheel, "*roteh*" which is the root of English "rotate" and was the word, the proto-Indo-European word for wheel.

There are also a lot of coincidences in this story. For example, there are strange similarities between the Baltic and the Indic languages. That could be explained if the migration across the steppe split at some point and one branch went up to the Baltic states and one branch continued south and east towards the subcontinent. So, it is circumstantial evidence. There's no direct evidence that those immigrants coming into India via the northwest corner in the second millennium BCE spoke Sanskrit.

Q: *A lot of scholars, however, claim that not only Sanskrit but the entire Indo-European language family originated in India. Does this theory hold any water?*

A: There's very little scientific evidence to support that. Uncertainty remains around the fact that nobody can say for sure that those immigrants spoke Sanskrit. And it is possible, like with many later immigrants to India, for example, the Scythians, the Greeks, the Mughals, that they abandoned their language and took up the local language. In order to resolve this mystery, we would like to know what language was spoken by the Harappan people. The Harappan script remains undeciphered. People have been trying to crack it for 100 years, and one of the reasons they've failed so far is because there's no equivalent of the Rosetta Stone. That is, there is no document or probably clay tablet that has been excavated by archaeologists that bears that language and another language that would allow us to compare the two.

One more piece of indirect evidence that supports the steppe theory is that there's an indirect link between Sanskrit, the Vedas, and the Brahmins. The Brahmins are traditionally the custodians of the Vedas and the ancient Hindu and Indic scripts; the Brahmins tend to have higher steppe ancestry than other social groups in India.

Q: *A lot of your book is set in the battlefields of Russia and Ukraine. Is the war a setback in unravelling the puzzle?*

A: Many of the archaeological sites that are relevant to this story are out of bounds today. Many of them have been mined, so they will be out of bounds for a very long time if they haven't been already destroyed. The museums also are threatened and there's a fight going on for possession of their contents and for who gets to tell the story about the history of that part of the world. It's a tragic state of affairs, but it makes it all the more urgent to tell this story and to continue doing the research.

India's 'darkest hour'

An excellent collection of essays on the Emergency tries to capture the deep impact, or the lack of it, on the collective psyche of the people

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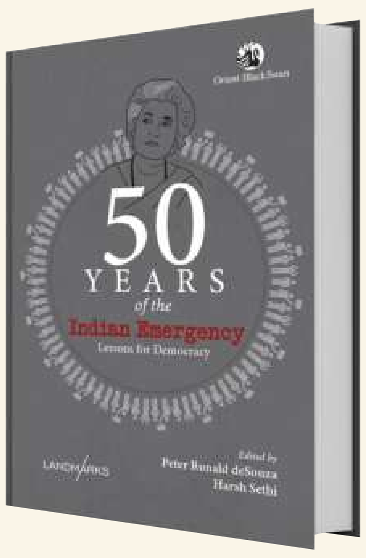
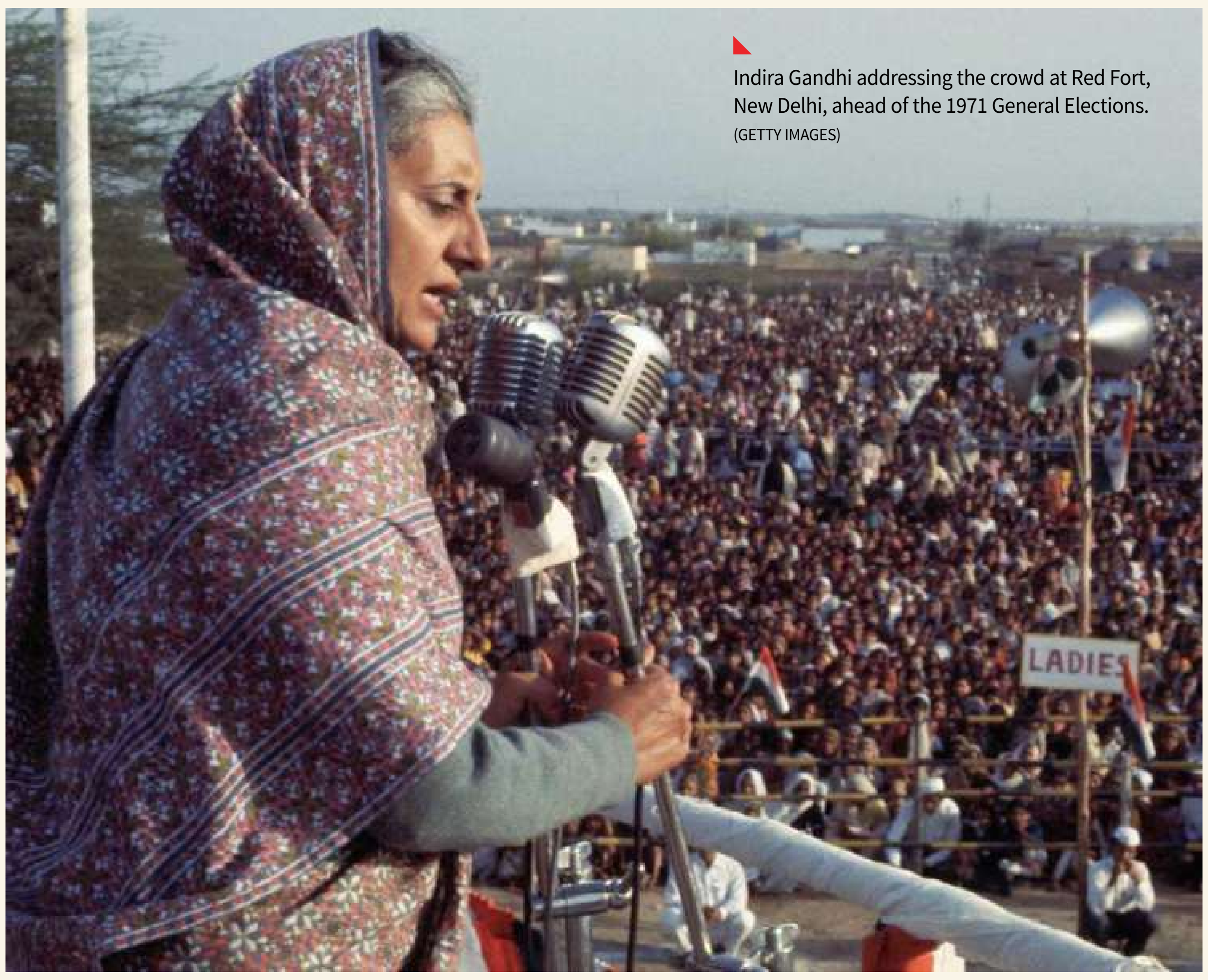


50 Years of the Indian Emergency: Lessons for Democracy
Edited by Peter Ronald deSouza, Harsh Sethi
Orient BlackSwan
₹1,025



Indira Gandhi addressing the crowd at Red Fort, New Delhi, ahead of the 1971 General Elections. (GETTY IMAGES)

The Emergency, during Indira Gandhi's prime ministership from June 1975 to March 1977, is rightly called "the darkest hour" in the history of free India. This was a phase when civil, political rights and liberties of people were brutally suppressed. Arbitrary and mass arrest of political rivals, press censorship, and the functioning of a secret police system are some of the well-known features of the period.

Critics of the regime were subjected to extreme violence. In some parts of north India, there were forced sterilisation drives and bulldozing of slums. Yet, it is simplistic to reduce the clamping of the Emergency only to Indira Gandhi's authoritarian ways. She did, of course, hurry through the process by not observing even the formality of taking the approval of her own Cabinet before imposing Emergency. It was promulgated after the Allahabad High Court held the Prime Minister's election to the Lok Sabha in 1971 null and void, and a vacation bench of the Supreme Court, while staying the High Court's verdict, allowed Indira Gandhi to continue as PM "but with weakened authority."

Emergence of JP

The Emergency was, in fact, the culmination of a number of events: the emergence of Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) as the credible face of anti-Indira Gandhi political forces coupled with the Nav Nirman (social reconstruction) movement and JP's call for "total revolution"; a successful U.S.-inspired coup, leading to the death of Chile's president Salvador Allende in September 1973, the Yom Kippur Arab-Israeli War next month, the subsequent "oil shock" from Arab countries, assassinations of Railway Minister L.N. Mishra in January 1975 and Bangladesh's founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman seven months later. All these and many more aspects have been captured in *50 Years of the Indian Emergency: Lessons for Democracy*, an excellent collection of essays, edited by Peter Ronald deSouza and Harsh Sethi. They have approached the subject from angles that are often left out while dealing with the Emergency.

'Black' days in poetry

Rukmini Bhaya Nair gives an overview of how the "black" days have been reflected through the imagination of poets of different Indian languages. It is an article that readers would not generally expect from a book that deals with the traumatic period. Her account of the works from 13 languages, including those from the south, dispels the popular notion that the 21 months of Emergency left the southern States undisturbed.

Kalpana Kannabiran's take on Andhra Pradesh, including the findings of a fact-finding committee, led by former Chief Justice (1957-1969) of the Bombay High Court V.M. Tarkunde, is gripping. She includes the account by a mother of one of the four men who were killed in an "encounter" near Pakala lake on October 31, 1976. The victims were tortured, their fingers chopped off before being hit by bullets.

> Critics of the regime were subjected to extreme violence. North India witnessed forced sterilisation drives and bulldozing of slums. Yet, it is simplistic to reduce the clamping of the Emergency only to Indira Gandhi's authoritarian ways

Even if we disagree with Kannabiran's assessment that popular consensus/public unawareness during the Emergency in the State could not adequately explain the Congress' landslide victory in the 1977 Lok Sabha polls in the southern State – or for that matter, the entire south – her version will be revealing to those born in the last 50 years. Mahmood Farooqui's piece is another convincing account of the sufferings of victims of the Emergency which talks about how the Kannada actor-activist Snehalata Reddy, lodged at the Bangalore Central Jail, was tortured psychologically before she died within days of her release.

Farooqui, who is essentially a littérateur, captured the pain of inmates of Tihar jail in New Delhi. His nuanced suggestion for the adoption of payment of reparations by convicts under a law of torts, instead of punitive incarceration, requires serious consideration of the authorities.

The socialist couple, Madhu Dandavate and Pramila Dandavate, were arrested within a month of the imposition of Emergency. While Madhu Dandavate was lodged in the Bangalore jail, Pramila was sent to Yerwada jail in Pune. Separated by about 800 km, the two apparently wrote nearly 200 letters to each other.

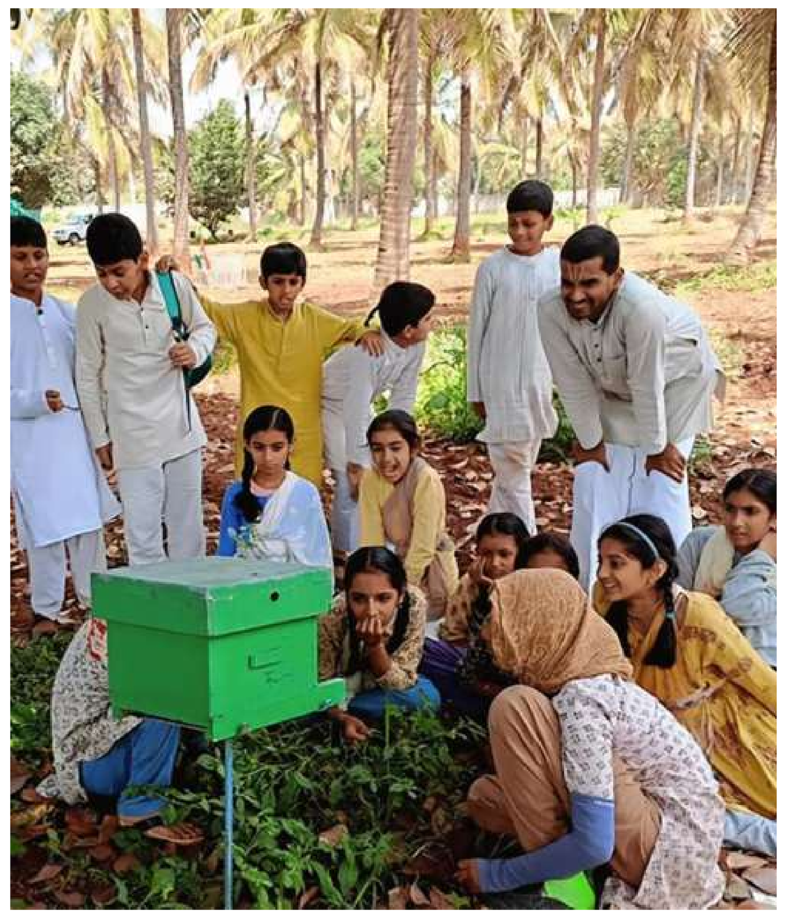
Gyan Prakash's article is revelatory about the erudite exchange between the two. They discussed everyone from Marx to Gandhi, literary works of Rabindranath Tagore and Kusumagraj. Errol D'Souza's essay on the economic factors that worked behind the Emergency gives an objective view. Freedom enjoyed by Scheduled Castes (SC) was the unintended beneficial consequence of the Emergency, as the SCs were till then in a "normal state of unfreedom" – this angle has been brought out in a thought-provoking essay by Gopal Guru.

Minor quibbles

In an otherwise scholarly work, the book does not offer any great insight about Indira Gandhi's spectacular return to power in 1980, even though many articles carried in the publication dwell upon several post-Emergency events quite elaborately. It remains a puzzle whether the people, despite experiencing the ugliest face of the state only a few years earlier, regarded political stability alone as the governing factor in their voting preferences. It appears that their proclivity for an individual-centric system, instead of a sound, impersonal and rule-based order, is quite deep.

Leaving aside this aspect and a few minor quibbles, the book is a timely wake-up call about the relevance of a past when institutions chosen to safeguard democracy miserably let down the people.

NEW YEAR RESOLUTION: SAVE BEES



CONTINUED FROM
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Apoorva tells me a story about the government sending the *Apis mellifera* to tribal regions in Chhattisgarh, where the people couldn't take care of the bees because they are migratory. Medha Monteiro, a beekeeper of almost a decade and president of the Bardez Beekeepers Society (BBS) in Goa, says, "There wouldn't be a need for our society if the KVIC or the National Bee Board did a competent job of teaching and equipping citizens with proper equipment." Before joining BBS, she says farmers and urban beekeepers alike have reported issues with sub-standard bee boxes (made with poor-quality wood, and gaps between boards), missing queen bees, or insufficient combs.

Genetically modified insects?

Though bees contribute to approximately 20% of total crop yield (according to a 2023 paper), we don't have numbers for bee population loss. Gowda from IISER says, "There is unfortunately no long-term data in India on any insect, let alone bees. This is not a fault of funding, but a lack of interest and understanding of the importance of these creatures within the scientific community. However, we know from studies outside of India that chemicals have affected bees' navigation, nesting and survival. It is the same as habitat loss."

A new study by researchers at the University of Sussex and Rothamsted Research in the U.K. found that sites sprayed with NPKS (Nitrogen, Phosphorus, Potash, Sulphur)-based fertilisers halve bee populations. Strikingly, the research also found 95% greater pollinator abundance and 84% greater pollinator species richness in untreated plots.

So, it's ironic that last October, the Union Cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved ₹37,952.29 crore for farmer subsidies on Di Ammonium Phosphate (DAP) and NPKS-based fertilisers. Pushing the irony further is the Government of India's initiative for beekeeping in 2025-2026 – a total outlay of ₹500 crore. This is a systemic problem and shows the inherent contradiction within the broader agricultural policy of the country.

Meanwhile, another initiative could also cause equal damage. In the 2025-26 budget, the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) received an overall allocation of ₹3,446 crore (a 50% increase from the previous year) to support biotechnology startups, including genetically modified insects. Yes, you read that right.

India has guidelines for these insects, but the potential for unforeseen ecological consequences from their release is a major concern. "Even the effect of non-native insects is unpredictable and has been known to go rogue [like the cane toads introduced in Australia that killed native predators]. We have no idea how a genetically modified one will affect its environment," says Gowda. They could lead to irreversible ecological disruptions by altering populations of pollinators, pests, and decomposers, which can have cascading effects on entire food webs.

Bees scare people, just like snakes [or street dogs]. Until we educate them, or people like me sensitise them, they will not be able to overcome it. Children are the best to teach this kind of empathy to. They do not come with any prior 'fear programming'

APOORVA B.V.
Bengaluru's Bee Man

(Clockwise from left) Himachali apple farmer and beekeeper Davinder Thakur; a Gujarati farmer mentored by UTMT; and children learning more about bees in Bengaluru. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

A shift in perspective

One of the fundamental problems today is that India's beekeeping policy is treated as a standalone livelihood sector, divorced from agricultural and environmental policy. Until the country integrates pollinator health into its core agricultural framework – by drastically reducing harmful pesticides, promoting ecological farming, and conserving natural habitats – other efforts will remain a palliative measure.

The most powerful action now is a shift in perspective, from seeing bees as just honey producers to recognising them as essential, vulnerable wildlife that sustain our food systems. By creating pockets of safety, food, and habitat, citizens can build a resilient network of sanctuaries that no single policy can achieve alone.

The writer is a permaculture farmer who believes eating right can save the planet.

ATCHU VELLAM'S FADING GLORY

How crop disease and changing manufacturing techniques are threatening the GI-tagged jaggery from Veeramangudi in Tamil Nadu

Nahla Nainar
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Till recently, the air in Veeramangudi, in Papanasam *taluk* of Tamil Nadu's Thanjavur district, used to be redolent with the fragrance of caramelised sugarcane juice, thanks to the over 100 family-run jaggery units here. These factories have now started closing down due to an attack of yellow leaf disease in the sugarcane crop.

In their heyday, these units specialised in the soft and crumbly *atchu vellam* (jaggery set into cubical wooden moulds). A 2024 application for a Geographical Indication (GI) tag by the Veeramangudi Atchuvellam Producers Association, Thiruvaiyaru, reveals that the factories in and around the village produce roughly 245 tonnes of jaggery annually.

A 30kg sack of Veeramangudi *atchu vellam* typically fetches around ₹1,350 in the market. "This is quite a reasonable price, but of late, we have been unable to get even this, because of the unusable crop," says P. Sathyaseelan, a third-generation farmer and jaggery maker from Veeramangudi. "It is no longer a profitable business. We are carrying on only because it is our family tradition," he adds.

A rich cultural legacy

Jaggery is an emotional component of Asian cuisine. It turns up in home remedies, Ayurvedic medicine and as wedding gifts, and is the flavour definer in sweet dishes like *pongal*, *dodol* and *chikki*, besides being a spice stabiliser in *sambar* and *rasam*.

In Tamil Nadu, one of the five major sugarcane producing states in India (along with Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Gujarat), many rural communities rely on jaggery production from sugarcane (known as *vellam*) and palm sugar (*karuppatti*) to cater to larger retailers, especially during the festival season that stretches from October to March. During the Pongal festival celebrated across the State, the making of *sakkarai pongal* – a sweet preparation made with rice, moong dal and jaggery in earthen pots on firewood stoves – is a treasured ritual.

Largely a self-sustaining cottage industry, Tamil Nadu's jaggery hotspots include Salem, Erode, Namakkal, Madurai and Virudhunagar. Many villages in the Cauvery delta region also produce artisanal jaggery in significant quantities.

Made with care

Recently, before copious rains hit the Cauvery delta region, farmer Aravinth and his co-workers prepared a batch of *atchu vellam*, with a mix of old and new technology. Gone are the cattle-driven juice extractor machines, their place taken by a noisy motorised thresher. The sugarcane juice is directed through an inbuilt channel into the *koprai*, a giant metallic flat pan set on a raised earthen stove that is lit with large batches of bagasse fibre (the dry residue left after the extraction of juice).

A master cook and his assistants stir the juice continuously with the help of long paddle spoons for up to two hours until it thickens. The concentrated cane sugar syrup is removed from the pan and allowed to rest for a while before it is poured into the *atchu* (mould) in wooden frames. Around 15 minutes later, the moulded jaggery is tapped out of the frames, cured for 30 minutes, and then packed in sacks.

On the cusp of change

The labour-intensive manufacturing technique has reduced the number of jaggery producers in many regions of Tamil Nadu. Modern-day industrial mills have shifted the processing from farms to factories. "Many farmers are moving away from sugarcane cultivation because its harvesting needs extra labour. And with the prolonged hot weather patterns, most of the crop is used for making juice or refined sugar. Only those with the financial resources can afford to produce jaggery profitably," says M. Karthikeyan, secretary, Tamil Nadu Jaggery Merchants Association, Madurai.

However, health-conscious urban consumers are driving the demand for good quality jaggery. "In today's culinary world, where farm-to-table and local ingredients are used for sustainability, jaggery stands out naturally. It is made with very little processing, unlike refined sugar," says M.S. Raj Mohan, chef and head, Department of Hotel Management, G.T.N. Arts College, Dindigul.

Mohan says that jaggery also scores over white sugar with its flavour and aroma. "In classic recipes, replacing jaggery with white sugar changes the flavour, texture, and overall soul of the dish. It blends well with spices like cardamom, ginger, cumin and pepper, and contains minerals like iron, calcium, and potassium."

(Clockwise from left) Large vats of sugarcane juice are cooked until they caramelise and thicken before being set into moulds to make *atchu vellam*; *sakkarai pongal* made with jaggery; and the finished jaggery cubes. (R. VENGADESH, GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK)

OTHER GI-TAGGED JAGGERY VARIANTS

- **Marayoor *sharkara*, Kerala**
  Handmade, with a distinct non-salty sweetness, and commonly used in Ayurvedic medicine
- **Kolhapuri *gul*, Maharashtra**
  The highest exported variety from India
- **Muzaffarnagar *gur*, Uttar Pradesh**
  The city has India's largest jaggery market, accounting for 20% of the country's total jaggery production

Scan the QR code to watch Veeramangudi's jaggery makers at work on **magazine.thehindu.com**

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

Disruptor (Clockwise from below) *Neolithic Coca-Cola Vase*, 2015, paint on pottery; Ai Weiwei; *Pollock in Blue*, 2019, in toy bricks; V.S. Gaitonde's *Untitled*, 2025, reimagined in toy bricks; (©AI WEIWEI/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERIA CONTINUA/ DUCCIO BENVENUTI - ART STORE)

IN CONVERSATION

AI WEIWEI, THE REBEL ARTIST

Known to call out power worldwide, the Chinese dissident artist brings to India his first solo show

Gautami Reddy

Ai Weiwei, known to many simply as Ai, is among the most widely recognised artist-activists alive. A relentless critic of state surveillance, corporate capitalism and the ways power infiltrates daily life, he has spent decades using art to expose systems most would rather ignore. His practice treats culture as a battleground, and art as one of the last spaces where authority can be questioned or overturned in public.

Born in Beijing in 1957, Ai spent his childhood in political exile after his father, the poet Ai Qing, was branded a "rightist" under Mao. He moved to New York in 1981 to study at Parsons, absorbing the city's experimental energy before returning to Beijing in the 1990s, to help shape an underground art scene outside state control.

His work pushed against official narratives: *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) – in which he smashed a 2,000-year-old relic and tore into the idea of who gets to own history; *Study of Perspective* (1995-2017) saw him photograph himself raising a defiant hand at global monuments, from Tiananmen Square to The White House. After the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, he led a citizen investigation to identify thousands of children killed in collapsing school buildings. The resulting exhibits were an indictment of state negligence that drew international attention. Detained for 81 days in 2011, he later left China and has continued to work and speak freely, most recently from Lisbon, Portugal. Last year, Ai took his first-ever exhibition to Kyiv, Ukraine, amid its war with Russia.

This past week, his first solo show arrived in India, at Delhi's Nature Morte gallery, presented with Galleria Continua, bringing together 15 works that track cultural fault lines across nearly three decades – China's upheavals, global supply chains, and the world's rolling crises. Five-thousand-year-old Neolithic axes and Qing dynasty chairs are painted white to suggest the flattening of history; the *Neolithic Vase with Coca-Cola Logo* appears like a corporate-era warning flare; four World War II stretchers stitched with hundreds of buttons form *F.U.C.K.*; and a wall of Lego "paintings" – remakes of iconic works by Hokusai, Vermeer, Da Vinci, Monet, V.S. Gaitonde, S.H. Raza and a *Pichwai* – pulls them into the pixel age.

Ahead of his visit to India Art Fair next month, in an email interview, Ai speaks about power, collapse, and why art still matters. Excerpts:

Question: *How do you feel about your first India exhibition and what conversations do you hope to inspire?*

Answer: Though I had never been to India until now, it is a country that fills my imagination with both a divine quality and a deeply, worldly social character. This mysterious place has always made me think of Buddhism, which has exerted a lasting and profound influence on China.

In my childhood, I encountered the work of the Indian poet [Nobel laureate] Rabindranath Tagore on my father's bookshelves. In Chinese eyes, his appearance resembles that of a spiritual practitioner devoted to inner cultivation: a deep gaze, a full beard, and a long, flowing robe, evoking in me a sense of a familiar kind of foreignness.

All of my father's books were burnt by the authorities, during the Cultural Revolution in the 1950s, a period of political harshness. So being able to come here, at this moment in time, feels like a blessing.

I hope that my modest exhibition can serve as a prelude, a catalyst, prompting young artists and thinkers to reflect on the dialogue between humanity and nature. These dialogues bring to mind Tagore's poem [*Gitanjali*, 1913]: *This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life*. The poem is suffused with hope. The source of hope lies in experience itself. One cannot entirely refuse hope, just as one cannot refuse experience.

Q: *You've chosen works that stretch across thousands of years and many traditions. What connects them?*

A: To offer a new interpretation and meaning to familiar objects has been an ongoing endeavour of mine: how objects survive history, change under power, and continue to speak across time.

Q: *In spite of their shared histories, India and China are often framed as political rivals.*

A: China and India are far more closely related than I once imagined or could fully grasp. These are two countries that have always possessed cultures of their own and have continued uninterrupted for 4,000-5,000 years, making them both unique presences in the cultural history of the world. This long continuity has allowed both cultures to develop profound ways of understanding the human condition. In both Indian and Chinese cultures, these questions have been lived, contemplated, and recorded with profound depth.

Q: *You bring up philosophical questions across civilisations. How do you gauge the condition of human life today?*

A: What China and India are facing today is a condition confronting the entire world: autocracy, the concentration of power, the collapse of humanity's spiritual life, and an era of materialism pushed to its extreme. Humanity has never truly realised, or even imagined, such a state under globalisation, a time that feels almost like an abyss.

Q: *With surveillance, digital control and AI shaping everyday life, where do you see artistic freedom heading?*

A: Today, in our lived reality, we can see that human life is increasingly controlled and surveilled through reinforced discourses of power and digital systems. Artificial Intelligence (AI) continuously absorbs what belongs to ordinary sentient beings of the mundane world – their joys and sorrows alike.

At such a moment, art is like the staff held in the hand of a spiritual practitioner, or a leaf falling beneath the Bodhi tree. No matter how perplexing the outside world becomes, or how close it seems to an inferno of suffering, the inner world can remain in bloom. It is precisely where art exists in the world: as a form of self-cultivation and as resistance.

I believe that precisely because we are living in an era that constantly diminishes, cancels, or erases the inner lives of individuals – a technologised age – art has more reason to exist now than in any other period, because only through self-reflection can humanity continue to move forward.

What China and India are facing today is a condition confronting the entire world: autocracy, the concentration of power, the collapse of humanity's spiritual life, and an era of materialism pushed to its extreme

Ai Weiwei's solo show is on view at Nature Morte, Dhan Mill complex, Chhattarpur, Delhi, until February 22.

The interviewer specialises in reporting on art, design and architecture.

POP-A-RAZZI

Naughty politics

When insults sound harmless, and our lawmakers turn them into verbal grenades

Politicians have to have thick skins because name-calling and insults have always been a part of the game.

Winston Churchill was a master at them. He called fellow U.K. prime minister Clement Atlee a "modest man with much to be modest about". Texas governor Ann Richards famously described then U.S. vice-president George H.W. Bush as having been "born with a silver foot in his mouth". Even former U.S. president Joe Biden got a zinger in when he said: "Rudy Giuliani – there's only three things he mentions in a sentence: a noun, a verb and 9/11." Now we live in the age of full-fledged insult politics. U.S. President Donald Trump has turned insults into a cottage industry of sorts – 'Sleepy Joe', 'Lying Ted', 'Crooked Hillary'. India too has had its share in recent years: 'Pappu', 'Chaiwala', 'Tukde Tukde Gang', 'Maunmohan Singh'.

But no one expected "naughty Home Minister" to become the insult *du jour*. And it has catapulted to the top of the memes.

When the Enforcement Directorate raided the offices of I-PAC, a political consultancy firm in Kolkata, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was up in arms. She told the media, "The nasty Home Minister, the naughty Home Minister who cannot protect the country. He is taking away all my party documents."

That had the country chortling but 'naughty man' or '*dushtu lok*' has a special space in Bengali hearts. It's an insult, but can hardly be called anti-national. *Dushtu lok* sounds innocuous, almost like child's play. Even the most diehard troll cannot go after anyone for calling someone "naughty".

The vanishing people

My own father was nicknamed 'Naughty' by my aunt because she was peeved he had "stolen" my mother via marriage. That nickname stuck all his life much to the mystification of everyone else who knew him as a very polite, soft-spoken *bhadralok*.

Naughty sounds cutesy, like something out of an Enid Blyton book like *The Naughtiest Girl in the School*. But in Bengali, *dushtu lok* or 'naughty man' is an insult of some pedigree. Of Tagore and Ray pedigree, in fact.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote a poem called 'Dushtu' (Naughty) where a child complains his mother calls him "*dushtu*" while every other Tom, Dick or Harry aka Nilu, Yatish, Satish is good. In the most popular collection of Bengali fairy tales, *Thakurmar Jhuli*, the *tuntuni* tailor bird has to outsmart the "naughty vizier". In the Satyajit Ray film *Sonar Kella* (The Golden Fortress), the villains push Dr. Hajra, a parapsychologist, down the hillside in Rajasthan. When Mukul, the young boy accompanying them, asks what happened to him, they pretend it was a magic trick. The "*dushtu lok*", they claimed, had just vanished. Of course, they were the real *dushtu lok* in the film, not the hapless Dr. Hajra.

In 2012, right after Mamata Banerjee had come to power in West Bengal, "*dushtu lok* vanish" hit the headlines. A cartoon appeared showing Banerjee talking to her party colleague, also named Mukul (Roy) like the boy in *Sonar Kella*. And in a cheeky take-off on Ray's lines, this Mukul says "*dushtu lok* vanish" and their party colleague Dinesh Trivedi, whom Banerjee had just unceremoniously ousted as Railways Minister, vanishes. The cartoon hit the headlines when an academic at Jadavpur University was arrested because he had forwarded it to some members of his housing society.

In a climate where freedom of expression is under attack worldwide, the story of that offending cartoon is now just a half-forgotten blip. But *dushtu lok* lives on, lurking around us like naughty ghosts ready to unleash mischief. Banerjee was following an old cultural tradition as she summoned up the spectre of a *dushtu lok*. If the Home Minister was *dushtu*, she by definition had to be its opposite.

Ocean of goodness

The opposite of a *dushtu lok*, is a goodboy (or goodgirl). And in our heads, it's usually one word, just like "goodjob". This is a category I have some expertise in. In school, I won Good Conduct medals much to my mother's delight. It went perfectly with the side parting in my hair, the handkerchief in my pocket, the black-rimmed spectacles. Now it makes me cringe to think I was one of those annoying children held up by other mothers as a "goodboy".

My mother stashed the medals in a locker, not because they were worth much, but because a burglar might think they were. When I moved to America as a student, I was not just trying to get a degree, I was probably trying to put an ocean between me and that good conduct medal.

So, if any *dushtu lok*, of any political stripe, wants to turn over a new leaf, I have a good conduct medal or two I can offer as a reward. But I suspect there will be many takers in a nasty world.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was recently in the news for her remarks against the Home Minister. (ANI)

***Sandip Roy**, the author of* Don't Let Him Know, *likes to let everyone know about his opinions, whether asked or not.*

FROM CULT TO CULTURE

HAMSA: INDIAN GOOSE OR EUROPEAN SWAN?

Goddess Saraswati's companion is far removed from the bird form Zeus took to seduce Leda

Every winter, a small miracle takes place across the Indian sky. High above the snow peaks of the Himalayas, at altitudes where even planes struggle to breathe, flocks of bar-headed geese glide southward from the frozen lakes of Central Asia. They descend into the wetlands of India (the Ganga plains) honking softly as they rest on the waters that have awaited them since Vedic times. This is the *hamsa* of Indian imagination, the bird of Saraswati, the emblem of wisdom, purity, and transcendence.

The bar-headed goose (*hansa*) is a key cultural symbol of India, along with other waterfowl such as the sarus crane (*krauncha*), ruddy shelduck (*chakravaka*) and crane (*baga, bagula*). This list excludes the swan (*raj-hansa*), which is European, not Indian. But somewhere in the last two centuries, the Indian goose was eclipsed.

In colonial translations, it was transformed into a European swan, a bird that never flew over the Himalayas, never nested in Ladakh, never knew our monsoons. The goose carved in stone on temple walls was ignored and everyone paid attention to swans appearing next to Shakuntala, transforming her into the Greek Leda.

Europeanising the sun bird

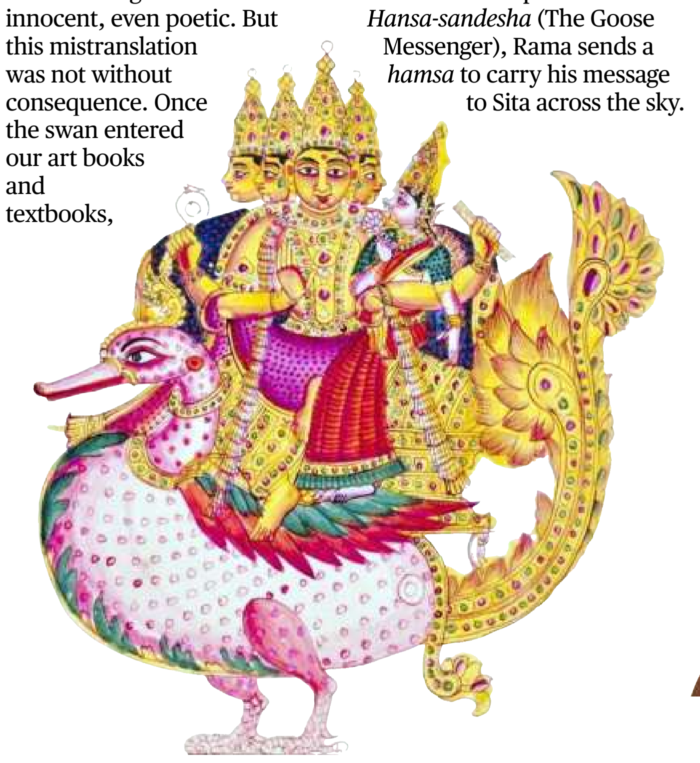
The *hansa* is the *Anser indicus*. It was a hardy, intelligent migratory bird that embodied the rhythm of India's seasons. It bred in Central Asia in the summer and through the monsoon, returning to India in winter, in time to eat the lotus fruit, following the same paths that traders, monks and, and perhaps, even the Indo-Aryans once followed thousands of years ago. The *Vedas* speak of the *hamsa* as the "sun-bird", the messenger of dawn, the soul that moves between the mortal and immortal realms. In the *Upanishads*, it becomes a metaphor for the liberated soul – the *paramahamsa*, one who rises above worldly waters.

In art and sculpture, friezes of 12th-century temples at Belur, Khajuraho, and Konark show the bird carved beside Saraswati, with a blunt beak, rounded body, and webbed feet. This was India's own sacred bird – born of her rivers, not borrowed from Europe's ponds.

A tile with a *hamsa* from Sri Lanka; (below) a painting of Brahma and Saraswati riding his *vahana*, the *hamsa*. (WIKICOMMONS)

When Europeans began translating Sanskrit in the 18th and 19th centuries, they encountered the word *hansa*. To them, it resembled the swan of their myths – the pure white bird form taken by Zeus to seduce Leda, or the swans of German folktales. So Saraswati's companion was Europeanised and deemed more elegant than the ugly goose. The swan was like a ballet dancer; the goose was the squat Indian *nautch* girl.

The change seemed innocent, even poetic. But this mistranslation was not without consequence. Once the swan entered our art books and textbooks,



the Indian goose vanished. Painters in British India, raised on European imagery, began to draw long-necked swans on temple posters. School books described Saraswati riding a swan. Even modern temples began installing swan imagery on signboards and calendars.

Over time, the bar-headed goose – once the bird of the Himalayas – was exiled from its own mythology. This was colonisation of imagination. We rejected the bird that actually flew over our skies in favour of one imported through colonial eyes. The swan became Sanskritised, while the goose was forgotten.

Erasing geography from faith

In the Sanskrit poem *Hansa-sandesha* (The Goose Messenger), Rama sends a *hamsa* to carry his message to Sita across the sky. She is equated with the lotus flower blooming through the monsoon waiting for the goose to arrive. By the time it does, the rains are over. It is autumn (*śarad*). The lotus has shed its petals and the fruit is ready for consumption. Saraswati is worshipped, and the season of knowledge begins. In poems such as these the rhythm of nature and the rhythm of myth were once one.

Modern education separates zoology from literature. Children are not told that Saraswati's goose is among the most extraordinary creatures on earth. It flies over the Himalayas at heights above 25,000ft, where oxygen is one-third of normal levels. Scientists still marvel at its lungs and blood chemistry. It flies at night, in formation, gliding on thin air, carrying no luggage except memory. Its annual journey, from the salt lakes of Tibet to the flooded plains of India, has continued unbroken for millennia. To call the *hansa* a swan is to erase geography from faith.

The orthodox Hindu who insists on painting Saraswati on a swan repeats a colonial error, mistaking imported iconography for authenticity. But the temples tell a different story. On their 800-year-old walls, the *hamsa* looks like what it truly is – a goose, not a swan.

Devdutt Pattanaik is the author of 50 books on mythology, art and culture.

GOREN BRIDGE

Remarkable deal

East-West vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

Our thanks to Richard Pavlicek, from Florida, for bringing this remarkable deal to our attention. Pavlicek has long been one of the USA's top players and teachers and has contributed to bridge on many levels. This deal was played, according to Pavlicek, in an unsophisticated bridge game where a bid of four no trump was always Blackwood. South discovered that partner had no aces - not a surprise - and one king, obviously the king of spades. Even if North held one of the missing jacks, thirteen tricks would not be certain, so South settled for six no trump.

South won the opening spade lead with his ace, cashed three top

NORTH
♠ K Q 10 5 4 3 2
♡ 3 2
◇ 5 4
♣ 10 9

WEST
♠ J 9 8 7
♡ 9 8 7
◇ 8 7 6
♣ 7 6 5

EAST
♠ 6
♡ J 6 5 4
◇ J 9 3 2
♣ J 4 3 2

SOUTH
♠ A
♡ A K Q 10
◇ A K Q 10
♣ A K Q 8

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
4NT	Pass	5♣	Pass
5NT	Pass	6◇	Pass
6NT	All pass		

Opening lead: Seven of ♠

hearts, and exited with a heart to East's jack. East shifted accurately to a low diamond - the slam could be made on a club shift - and South bravely played his 10. That got him to 11 tricks, but he had to give East a club trick later and settled for down one. A maddening result! Even worse, Pavlicek tells us that North-South can make a grand slam in each of the four suits, just not in no trump. Seven spades will make on a trump coup with any lead but a trump. Seven of a red suit makes by ruffing the 10 of the other red suit, taking the club finesse, and then finessing for the jack of trumps. We'll leave it to interested readers to work out the play in seven clubs.

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

All about extreme sports

In zorbing, a rider goes inside a large transparent ball which is rolled down a hill. The word 'zorb' refers to the orb and supposedly the country where this sport started. (GETTY IMAGES)

Berty Ashley

1 On January 18, 1981, Phil Smith and Phil Mayfield jumped off the top of a Houston skyscraper. They deployed their parachutes, landed safely and started a new extreme sport called BASE jumping. It is an acronym of things the athletes jump off from. What does the 'B', which they achieved, stand for?

2 Lt. Colonel Satyendra Verma carried out India's first-ever BASE jump from the 450ft-tall Pitampura TV tower building in 2010. His job was to intercept and disrupt enemy communications, so fittingly, what does the letter 'A' stand for in BASE jumping?

3 The Huajiang Grand Canyon Bridge at a height of 625m (2,051ft) is currently the highest bridge in the world. It attracts a lot of BASE jumpers from around the world. What word, which refers to the section between supports, does the 'S' in BASE stand for?

4 Russian extreme athlete Valery Rozov achieved the world's highest BASE jump in 2013 by leaping from the north face of Mount Everest at 7,220 m/23,688 ft. He wore a wingsuit, which allowed him to fly at 201kmph before landing safely. What does 'E' in BASE stand for?

5 One of the most popular extreme sports gets its name from an old English word which means 'anything thick and squat'. In the 1920s, it was used to refer to a rubber eraser, and in the 1930s, to an elastic cord that launched gliders. What word is this?

6 Zorbing is a sport in which a rider is inside a large transparent ball and rolled down a hill. The word 'zorb' refers to the orb and supposedly the country where this sport started. Which country is this, that is a hotbed for extreme sports?

7 In 1995, TV media company ESPN founded an action sports competition in the US. It featured skateboarding, skiing, snowboarding, BMX and Moto X. By what fitting name is this event known?

8 This is wind-propelled water sports that brings together sailing, paragliding and surfing. For a long time, the sport had the speed sailing record of 194kmph. Athletes reach this speed thanks to equipment which resembles a children's toy. What sport is this?

9 This is probably one of the oldest extreme sports, as humans have been doing this for thousands of years. With types like Alpine, Himalayan and Ice, it focuses on the athlete's strength, endurance, flexibility and balance. What sport which is now even found in malls?

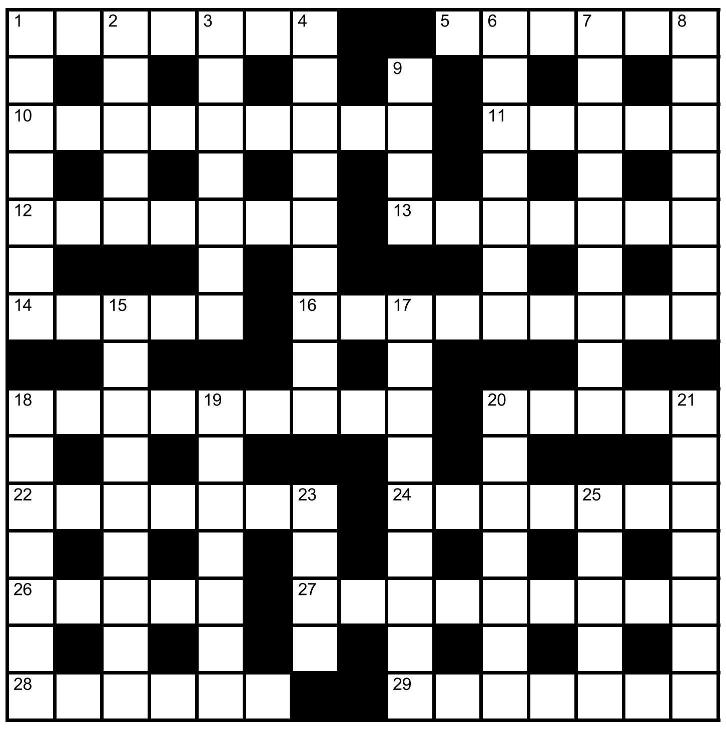
10 EI is an extreme sport invented in 1997, where athletes take a household item to remote locations. Then they perform a chore while doing an extreme sport like skiing, parachuting or mountaineering, with the result being something formal to wear. What does 'EI' stand for?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Buildings
2. Antenna
3. Spans
4. Earth
5. Bungee / Bungy
6. New Zealand
7. The X Games
8. Kitesurfing
9. Rock climbing
10. Extreme ironing

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 39 (Set by Vidwan)



Across

1 Keep an eye on space around metal wheels (7)
5 Shaman loses head, chasing large reptile (6)
10 Democrat breaking new ground, initially covered Australia and New Zealand (4,5)
11 Almost contain exposed rock damage (5)
12 Officer mostly wears good perfume (7)
13 A comrade male MLA, for instance (7)
14 One whose conviction lasts the longest (5)
16 Suffering consumption every single game! (9)
18 How may a feline suspect a trick? (5,1,3)
20 He replaces easel in never-ending board game (5)
22 State of fashionable princess (7)
24 Strips to make fun of a snooty fellow from the east (7)
26 Union Point (5)
27 Fellow dumped beautiful bride checking good way to catch flight! (3,6)
28 English 'crossword' for every setting essentially (6)
29 Breaking News! Sit and watch! (7)

Down

1 Degree doctor claimed (7)
2 Jack buried treasure south of Norway's post (5)
3 Eeriness – tramp turning into registered nurse! (7)
4 Salad symbolising Communist spirit for everyone (3,6)
6 Receive from predecessors in their shifts (7)
7 Use lead (9)
8 Based on ten medical works (7)
9 Plant food from our earth (4)
15 I felt endless pride, flying for expedition (5,4)
17 Wring toe possibly to thrive on each other (9)
18 Discipline based on logic, not against sense of morality (7)
19 Manufacturing the real suede (7)
20 Club occasionally admits having a bar! (7)
21 Extremely tenuous, messy, unstable structures (7)
23 Nadal goes back a long distance (4)
25 Elder is awkward to idolise (5)

SOLUTION NO. 38

	S		S		S		P		E		P		S	
A	C	H	E		C	R	O	S	S		E	M	I	T
	A		E		R		A		T		N		L	
B	R	I	D	L	E		C	A	R	D	A	M	O	M
			L		E		H		A		N			
A	F	F	I	A	N	C	E		N	I	G	G	L	E
	E		N				D		G				E	
A	D	A	G	I	O	S		G	E	O	L	O	G	Y
	U				V		O				O		I	
A	P	O	G	E	E		R	E	L	O	C	A	T	E
			A		R		L		Y		H			
A	M	B	R	O	S	I	A		R	A	N	S	O	M
	A		A		E		N		I		E		P	
P	L	U	G		A	N	D	E	S		S	E	T	T
	E		E		S		O		T		S		S	

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

A hidden epidemic in Andaman

In a society that easily resorts to suicide, little can be achieved through clinical measures alone; hence, targeted outreach programmes hold the key

Anna Sinha
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As I returned daily from my duties as an IPS probationer posted in Port Blair, waves of tourists lazily strolling against sorbet skies and azure waters would greet me. But beneath this seemingly perfect picture, the Union Territory silently deals with a staggering suicide rate of 37.89 per lakh population, more than three times the national average of 12.4 in 2022. For a police officer, it seems ironical – when other crimes associated with stress have not yet proliferated on the joy islands, why the high suicide rate? I turned to State Crime Records Bureau data to understand.

South Andaman district is the most vulnerable, with a suicide rate of 51.09, four times above the national average. Occupation-wise, government servants with 10 times the national average suicide rate, and private salaried employees with five times the national average are the most vulnerable. The most affected age group is 30 to 45, which forms nearly 40% of all suicide cases. Analysis of suicide causation patterns reveals that illness and old age are the leading causes of suicides here, followed by depression and loneliness. This stands in contrast with the national average data of the National Crime Records Bureau, wherein family problems are the leading cause, accounting for 32.4% of suicides across India.

Why are people choosing the "escape route"? The field of geographical psychology highlights that isolation and a lack of an "escape route" creates a Kafkaesque scenario in the mind which often ends in the person choosing to end his or her life. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, with its sparse population of 46 persons per sq. km (Census 2011) inhabiting far-flung islands and only a few direct flights and ships to the mainland, is a case in point.

Society of these islands is a patchwork of local tribals, descendants of freedom fighters, and settlers brought in by the government from Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Bihar, and so on. Intermarriage led to an erosion of traditional bonds of kinship within each group. There is a peculiarly widespread prevalence of extramarital affairs, domestic violence, alcoholism, and drug abuse. This created unstable households, a breeding ground for mental issues. Post tsunami, the government settled affected families in safer areas, giving them a stipend, monthly ration, and land. The tribal way of life, filled with physical rigours, died. Divorced from its roots, a society built for toughness even in daily life stands reduced to fragility. Many suicides are even attributable to not getting an iPhone or the latest iPad.

Policy intervention

Data-driven policymaking is as good as the data that informs it. The unnatural deaths proforma, which is used to record data of suicide, must record socioeconomic data and risk factors, such as income levels, education level, unemployment, and substance abuse, so that emerging suicide risk patterns and hotspots can be gauged. Data audits at the State Crime Records Bureau must be conducted on lines of financial system audits to prevent misreporting, and maintain data quality.

Inquest and investigating officers must be trained in the art of probing intelligently for underlying emotional, social, or economic causes of the suicide, instead of recording the cause of suicide superficially.

Miscategorisation of data by recording staff may be dealt with by redesigning the proforma to incorporate tick-boxes so that data is informative, not misguiding.

A dedicated 24x7 suicide surveillance and prevention cell staffed by mental health professionals is a must. A collaboration may be made with the Directorate of Health Services, NGOs, school authorities, and the Panchayati Raj institutions for the same.

Deploying personnel

In a society that so easily resorts to suicide, little can be achieved through clinical measures alone. Targeted outreach programmes are key. For instance, illness and old age being a major cause of suicide necessitates the presence of healthcare professionals at every public outreach function/mela by the district police and administration.

Small-scale crowd-funded insurance policies may be launched as a welfare measure. Short-duration emotional resilience training programmes, anger management courses, and peer support groups, may be incorporated in educational institutions. The suicide problem on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands needs conscious acknowledgement and thoughtful interventions. It is time that the islands, which give many a happy memory to travellers, became a haven for its natives as well.

Those in distress can call the Lifeline Foundation on (033) 24637401/32

Earlier, doctors used to come to a bedridden patient's residence, at least during critical moments. GETTY IMAGES

Why are doctors not coming on house visits?

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Some good habits are becoming extinct over the past few years, and doctors' visit to patients, particularly those suffering from serious ailments, is one of them. Earlier, doctors used to come to a bedridden patient's residence, at least during critical moments, and used to give advice, perhaps more out of compassion for a fellow human being than for other considerations.

Regrettably enough, this practice had vanished over the decades, raising much concern among the older generation.

Even now, in cinemas of the bygone era, one can see the family doctor visiting patients for consultation and health advice. I am afraid medical ethics and codes in the world may have led to the end of such type of visits.

Is this the way we are progressing? Is there no value for human beings in distress. Is it all right to leave them to their fate?

I request the medical fraternity to view this with sympathy and compassion and serve humanity in a noble and generous manner.

Ushering in the AI-enabled digital health transformation

Medical administrators need exposure to technology assessment, economic evaluation of digital interventions

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GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

It is universally acknowledged that Digital India has put digital health and artificial intelligence as its priority. Along with scores of major hospital chains, the National Digital Health Mission and NITI Aayog have started implementing AI-enabled digital health programmes. It is no longer "when"; it is a question of "now". Hospital managers now need to be digital health leaders who can design, evaluate and govern technology-enabled care models for India's mixed health system.

The reimagined MBA programme in healthcare management should align with India's National Digital Health stack Ayushman Bharath Digital Mission (ABDM) and view healthcare as a data-driven service industry. Integrating private hospital records with the National Digital Health Blueprint (NDHB) as core content in "Digital Health Systems" and "Health Policy & Regulation" modules will be necessary.

Medical administrators need to lead digital transformation in hospitals and health systems. They should be familiar with clinical workflows and technology integration, electronic health record standards, telemedicine practice guidelines, medical device and Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation regulations. The administrators of the future, particularly when working in resource-constrained environments, need exposure to health technology assessment (HTA) and economic evaluation of AI and digital interventions. In the coming decade, they should be staunch advocates of "Make in India, for the world". They should look at Indian hospitals as a destination for global netizens. They need to see the "big picture". They should be managers who can be absorbed into national and State digital health programmes in India and overseas.

> **Healthcare managers should be exposed to** case-based learning using Indian and global examples of AI in radiology, pathology, ICU, population risk prediction, and operations

Partnering with leading health tech companies, start-ups and research institutions will ensure that MBA (healthcare management) students gain hands-on experience with real-world AI applications and digital health innovations. These partnerships provide access to live datasets, AI platforms, and mentorship from industry experts. Internships with national and global health tech platforms, medical device and imaging companies, healthcare IT and consulting firms will be required. Healthcare managers should be exposed to case-based learning using Indian and global examples of AI in radiology, pathology, ICU, population risk prediction, and operations.

Modern content

Training the trainer is equally important. Delivering modern, interdisciplinary content relevant to India's evolving digital health landscape may require unlearning and relearning. Hands-on experience with real-world tools and platforms will become necessary. Continuous professional development for the faculty should be mandatory.

The AIIMS, IIM and IIT in Jammu need to be congratulated for putting together a truly blended, future-ready, joint MBA programme in hospital administration & healthcare management. This pioneering programme focuses on managing healthcare systems, blending medical insights with management and technology. The two-year, full-time residential programme provides specialised skills for leadership roles in digital health. Leveraging the strengths of the three national institutions, it is indeed a future-ready course.

A brainstorming session involving decision makers of digital health with management "gurus" and tech enablers in healthcare is necessary to develop a cadre of future-ready medical administrators and healthcare managers.

The author is a distinguished professor at Tamilnadu Dr. MGR Medical University

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

This article captures Silicon Valley at a turning point, seen through the everyday lives of Indian immigrants facing a tightening political climate and the swift rise of artificial intelligence. ('Caught between Trump and the machine'; Jan. 11) Written with restraint and clarity, the story avoids alarmism, yet leaves the reader with a lingering sense of unease. It is a thoughtful and empathetic look at how people adapt when the ground beneath a technology hub begins to shift.

Muhammed Yasin

The article stands out for its clarity and depth in understanding the current global scenario that is linked to America's political transformations and accelerating innovations in AI. The article offers readers a lens to understand how human agency is increasingly altered by algorithms, automation, and AI-driven decision-making.

K. Sita Rama Sastry

The impact of AI on job markets is a global concern and India is no exception as there is all-round fear of retrenchment, especially for entry level jobs. In such a scenario, up-skilling is key.

T.N. Venugopalan

The rapid and pervasive growth of artificial intelligence, along with its ability to infiltrate every aspect of life, is a stark reality in today's technology-driven world. Learn and engage with AI to prevent yourself from becoming obsolete.

Sajna Hameed

As Nitin Chaudhary moves around San Jose in the Silicon Valley with Nishant Agarwal, discussing the current scenario in the US, we understand the full impact of AI upon the tech world. Scores of Indian students' dreams have been put on hold due to the tariff hike, visa fees and travel restrictions.

B. Ramadoss

A rich life

The tribute to the late writer and art critic Geeta Doctor by Bharatanatyam exponent Leela Samson was richly deserved. ('Geeta Doctor, the sharp observer'; Jan. 11) Geeta was a free spirit. Her passing has left the art world a lot poorer as she was a trenchant critic, a connoisseur of art and a remarkable raconteur as well.

C.V. Aravind

Restoration efforts

The conservation projects undertaken by different environmental groups in the Nilgiris biosphere is indeed heartening. ('Return of the native'; Jan. 11) The restoration of shola forests and the removal of invasive plant species by ecologists adopting indigenous knowledge are invaluable contributions to revive wildlife habitats.

Monita Sutherson

It's in the air

G. Sampath unveils the foibles and follies of the current Delhi administration. ('Align your New Year energy'; Jan. 11) His sarcasm targets the vanity and unscientific mindset of those in positions of power.

N. Sadasivan Pillai

MORE ON THE WEB

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Reclaiming the whimsy in reading
Read out of interest, curiosity or when bored; it will change you in unimaginable ways
Anjana Ravi

Rethinking the diet debate
Food isn't just fuel, it's culture, ethics, science, and personal philosophy served on a plate
Sanskriti Pokhriyal

The quiet disappearance of greeting cards
The emotional craftsmanship that once defined human relationships has steadily thinned
K. Suresh Babu

When persistence pays off
The lengths to go to grow a plant
Vidya Vasudevan

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RAW MANGO'S KOLKATA TEST

The brand's newest outpost is an exercise in restraint and respect, and Sanjay Garg is looking forward to the "sari-wearing market's" response

Karuna Ezara Parikh

Last month, designer Sanjay Garg's Raw Mango opened its seventh store in the country, this time in Kolkata. Many months in the making, the milestone fashion moment was celebrated online, and within the city itself.

It came at a time when Garg was also showcasing at the Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa, as well as a textile show in Paris. He calls it the "craziest time of his life". He's also due to show at London Fashion Week in February, and all this begs the question – was now really the time?

But the 4,800 sq.ft. space feels like a triumph. This has much to do with how lovingly Garg and long-time collaborator, architect Adityan Melekalam, have treated the 1930s Kolkata Art Deco building. It's not without some suspicion that an "outsider" attempting to dip their hands into Kolkata heritage is viewed. But even the naysayers have admitted – the store is beautiful.

An ode to the city

Entering the Raw Mango *bari*, I am struck by its austerity. Almost eschewing commerce, it initially appears to have nothing to sell, and invites you instead to take a seat, and call out for *cha*. Upstairs, angular rooms that once must have slept whole families, now look out on to Maddox Square Park, the site for one of the city's popular Durga Puja *pandals*.

The furniture is minimal, and follows the shapes within the house, often impractical octagons and hexagons that delight Garg who seems to have relished transforming it into a home. As in a home, you rarely ever see the clothes of the inhabitants. They lie within *almirahs*, built into the building's own original alcoves for the same, and it's only when you open them that shocks of pink and emerald dance out. For those who are familiar with his Banjara Hills, Colaba, Teynampet or other stores, the style is consistent.

Without trying to be Bengali, or even create an "ode" to the city, Garg has crafted an echo of one. The red oxide of the classic Kolkata home is present, but in a subdued matt finish. The shine it traditionally sports has been transferred to the doors, lacquered in a diminutive oxblood.

There are small Gupta period statues, photos of Jawaharlal Nehru, and photographer Bharat Sikka's work up, all from the designer's own collection. The statues of Kumartuli find form in the most Kolkata of things, two gentle figures of a resting street dog, Chunu, created by sculptor Sahasrangshu Saha, elevated to eye level. There's also the visitors' washroom, awash in simple yet Subodh-esque steel.

A day prior to the launch, I see Garg's brother-in-law Nitin Sisodia standing in the winter sun, overseeing last-minute decor. Together with Prerna, Garg's elegant sister who has played muse to the brand in the past, they run A Dialogue, a food biodiversity conservation project that designs culinary experiences – and did so for the opening night. *Sharbats* with marigold petals are distributed in stainless steel glasses. Clover leaves act as small spoons to mouthfuls of mustard cream. *Gondhoraj* (lime) rice bites come in leaf cones, and sweet *sandesh* is laced into lotus flowers. The food is served in an open-air courtyard that feels like an ode to Garg's Rajasthani roots.

Hiccups and criticism

Despite the beauty of the store, there have been hiccups. As part of the launch, a team in Kolkata recorded snippets of locals speaking Bengali. Some appear as projected typography on the store walls and others were played over Raw Mango's Instagram reels. When the recordings were released on social media, one local designer commented on how the incorrect form of a Bengali word had been used.

Austere yet eye-catching
(Clockwise from top) Raw Mango's designs; guests at the Kolkata store; founder-designer Sanjay Garg; and an example of the statuery in the Art Deco space. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

The final consensus in the city is that she was wrong, that it was simply a less common dialect, but the flare-up that ensued showed a side of Bengal that might be quick to pull down a designer who dares to bring what many feel are overpriced Banarasis to the state of the Banarasi-wearing bride.

But Garg is no stranger to claims of appropriation, and has spoken out in the past about the balance between borrowing from cultures and acknowledging them with respect. When I ask if he is worried about entering this market, he says what scares him sometimes is that Kolkata is a "sari-wearing market", suggesting this is a test in some ways, but emphasises the love the brand has received in the city over the years. He says it isn't just Marwari clients he has, as many assume. "Our Kolkata clientele is made up of an equal number of Bengalis as Marwaris, and of course others."

Other criticisms come up in the choice of music for the show. Curated by arts experience company Artsforward, musicians from the collective The Other Borno performed a live piece made to feel like a street protest. It was inspired by singers Bhupen Hazarika and Paul Robeson, and honoured the Ganga. The story felt like the perfect tribute – a river that flows through the country, and makes its way from Banaras to Kolkata. But despite its powerful messaging, some complained of the dissonance between the audio and visual experience.

The clothing itself, as always, went beyond the Banarasi, showcasing a variety of Raw Mango pieces, not all new creations but an amalgamation. An eye-catching green *bandhani* coat, broad striped skirts, an exquisite scalloped black sari. Different textiles shone and came together, beautifully styled by Nikhil D. But whether the city of complex joys will truly embrace Garg and his dreamhouse is yet to be seen. He is hopeful though, and full of love and admiration for Bengal.

The writer, spoken word poet, and screenwriter is based in Kolkata.

Emirati stories (Clockwise from left) The Magan boat; tapering wings of the Zayed National Museum; and a statue with their beloved falcons. (SERISH NANISETTI, AFP)

Through an Arab lens

From a Bronze Age boat to the founding father's Chrysler Newport, the Zayed National Museum curates the history of the Emirates

Serish Nanisetti
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Museums are not merely places; they are stories woven across time and land. The newly inaugurated Zayed National Museum in Abu Dhabi proves this as its five tapering falcon wings rise dramatically above the skyline. Anchored inside is a 60-foot boat with a prow rising to 11 feet – the very vessel I once encountered in a school textbook on the Indus Valley Civilisation. Reconstructed with help from university scholars, researchers and boatmen from Kerala, using wood, coir and bitumen, the Magan boat is a Bronze Age marvel. It links this desert nation to Meluhha, the maritime trading port of the Indus Valley Civilisation.

Boats like these once carried copper across the Arabian Sea to ports on India's western coast 3,000-4,000 years ago. Without a nail, bolt or screw, revived from engraved drawings and materials described in cuneiform writing on ancient tablets, the boat did a two-day sea trial in the Arabian Gulf, sailing 50 nautical miles, before being anchored at the museum.

More than a land of petroleum

The museum positions itself as a place where the world and civilisation are interpreted through an Arab lens. "The history here is from the perspective of the United Arab Emirates. It is not the other way around. It is not from a British perspective," says Mohamed Khalifa Al Mubarak, Chairman of the Department of Culture and Tourism, Abu Dhabi.

With a massive 30-metre faceted mound, tipping the hat to the desert topography, the museum has been designed by British architect Norman Foster. The wingtips function as thermal chimneys, creating cooling air currents that pull out warm air from the building. The architects call them 'Canadian vents'; Khalifa Al Mubarak calls them '*barjeel*', an ancient wind-tower design that has long kept homes and public spaces cool across the region.

Walking through the space, I realise that museums are not just about contested objects; they are a culture speaking to itself, a collective memory that interprets the world and repositions our place within it. Here, an old notion dissolves – the idea of the UAE as merely a land of petroleum, sand dunes, date palms, sea and shopping malls, stripped of history. Instead, it evokes awe as it lays out a tapestry linking oasis, horses, coffee pots, dates, water infrastructure, and falcons, tracing the land's story from the palaeolithical, pre-Islamic era to the modern one. "One of the surprises for me was finding a Bronze Era sword inside a burial mound in Al Ain. It was oxidised, but we learnt that people were buried with their personal goods. The restored sword showed the warrior mentality of the people," Khalifa Al Mubarak says during the tour. It is this command of narrative that shapes the visitor experience.

Celebrating the UAE

The museum houses 1,500 objects, sourced from all seven emirates, within six permanent galleries, combining archaeological artefacts, historic objects, audiovisual and sensory experiences, and contemporary installations and reconstructions. It also pays tribute to the life and times of Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, founding father of the UAE. The tour begins with the 600-metre outdoor Al Masar Garden, featuring a *ghaf* (Persian mesquite) tree from one of his residences. Inside, replicas of horses have been recreated from breeds descended from those he rode, and a replica of his 1966 Chrysler Newport and his camel stick accompany the exhibits.

The narrative celebrates the nation's enduring bond with falcons too. "Falcons were key to survival as they helped hunt during difficult times. They are our family," says the curator of a gallery depicting a land that is part desert, part sea and part urban carnival. One diorama illustrates the ancient Tethys Sea and the formation of fossil fuels, represented through glass micro-organisms symbolising the country's modern wealth. Another display presents one of the oldest known pearls, an 8,000-year-old find discovered in 2017 on Marawah Island, linking pearl-diving to the country's long history.

The cultural district

Built on Saadiyat Island, the museum joins a constellation of institutions reshaping the UAE's cultural landscape. It is at walking distance from the Louvre Abu Dhabi, on an artificial island crowned by a steel dome visible from space, which houses artefacts ranging from Renaissance paintings to bronzes from Tamil Nadu. The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is under construction, while the Natural History Museum Abu Dhabi currently hosts Lucy, the 3.2-million-year-old skeleton considered the mother of humanity, on loan from Ethiopia.

By bringing these intertwined human narratives together, Abu Dhabi is forging a new visual history of the country – one in which the Zayed National Museum asserts its suzerainty over culture and our collective human heritage.